Overworked and Underpaid: "Black" Work at the College of Charleston

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"They walk by us like we don't exist. We're invisible," Thelma told me as we spoke on a bench across from the Stern Student Center during her lunch break. [All names in this paper are pseudonyms.] Since 1994, Thelma, a middle-aged, black woman, has been working as a custodian for the College of Charleston, located in Charleston, South Carolina. She was referring to the students, faculty, and administration who fill the campus daily. And although Thelma has been sweeping floors, dusting windows, emptying trashcans, tidying classrooms, and, in other words, performing all those tasks essential to the upkeep of the College's buildings, she's only been getting benefits for half the time she's been here. For the first seven years of employment she was on "temporary" status, meaning that she didn't have health insurance, paid leave, or a retirement fund. And in her fourteenth year of employment, Thelma still is earning only $9.45 an hour, barely two dollars more than the wage at which she was hired. At this wage, she is taking home $19,625 a year. To put this annual salary in perspective, the average per capita income for Charleston County in 2007 was $28,265 ("Charleston County (SC) 4th Quarter 2007"). Thelma explained to me that if she were to complain to her supervisors or ask for a raise, "They threaten to fire you and say you're easy to be replaced." Thelma may feel invisible, but she is not alone. She is one of hundreds of College of Charleston service sector workers —custodians, maintenance workers, groundskeepers, food service employees—who perform countless tasks and duties necessary for the College to operate. Thelma is also a part of trend I haven't been

able to ignore for four years, and part of an answer to a question I must ask as I approach graduation: why are almost all the "blue-collar" service workers at the College of Charleston black? Why, in the words of those at the College of Charleston employees, are black service sectors systematically "overworked and underpaid?"

In this paper, I will show that Thelma and other black service sector workers are part of a trend of African American workers' overrepresentation in service sector jobs in the city of Charleston as well. In fact, they are part of an emerging hegemonic construction of black work in which African American workers are increasingly made vulnerable in the local labor market in the face of a "globalization." My aim is to explain how these black workers have become "stuck" in dead-end jobs. I characterize "dead-end" jobs as those with low wages, little or no benefits, no opportunity for promotion, and little security. While the United States shrouds itself in the powerful rhetoric of the American dream, how is it that certain workers have not been able to "work their ways up the ranks" and become stuck in these dead-end jobs? And because the workers who are stuck in these jobs are overwhelmingly black, what does that mean for claims that our nation is coming closer and closer to achieving the ideal of "color-blindness?"

Thelma matters because she is representative of an American wage worker's attempt to participate in "the dream." However, her story becomes even more important because she is poor, black, and a woman: in other words, a member of socially, politically, and economically marginalized groups. Her experiences as a worker in the College of Charleston service sector can provide valuable insight into how issues of class, race, and gender interact within the local labor market. Through a case study of the College, I will use the stories of service sector workers like Thelma to investigate how these dynamics are regulated within the space of work through employer practices and workplace rules and norms. Through the course of this paper I hope to better explain why African Americans are overrepresented in the service sector in Charleston, and consequently how racial hierarchies are (re)produced within the local labor market.

Labor Market Segmentation and Race
Formerly an important hub on the Atlantic slave trade, Charleston

historically relied on free black African labor for its agricultural-dominated economy. Even in this post-Civil War context, tourists and natives alike are bombarded by remnants of the city's slave economy past—plantations, Confederate statues, antebellum churches, and the former slave market. They also are waited on hand and foot by a significant number of African American workers performing manual service, or "blue-collar," jobs in the hospitality and tourism sector. While the new economy is service-based, the old racialized workforce dynamic still seems to be present. Whites are overwhelmingly represented in managerial and supervisory roles, while blacks are overwhelmingly within the lowest tier of workers. While blacks only make up 34% of the city of Charleston's population, they account for 43.1% of the service and maintenance sector ("blue-collar") jobs. Within this sector, more specifically, blacks account for 58.3% of janitors and building cleaners, 86.7% of maids and housekeeping cleaners, and 54.3% of food preparation workers (Census 2000 EEO Data Tool). This overrepresentation of blacks in the service sector has material consequences. According to the 2000 US Census, the median household income in Charleston was $43,000 for whites, but only $20,005 for blacks. On average blacks are earning about 46.5% of the income that whites earn.

The College of Charleston, the third-largest employer in the city of Charleston ("Century V Report"), provides a prism through which we can better understand the dynamics among race, class, gender, and the local labor market of Charleston. Founded in 1770, the College is located in the heart of Charleston. Home to about 10,000 students, who could be considered intellectual "products" themselves, the school also employs close to 2,000 employees. Of these, 90 (as of 2007) are permanently employed in the skilled craft and service/maintenance sectors. The College also employs roughly a hundred temporary employees in these sectors, through the Department of Residence Life and Housing and the Physical Plant. Finally, there are also hundreds of contracted workers (called "contractors") physically employed at the College, but paid by its two subcontractors: ARAMARK Services (food service) and WFF Services (custodial service). I will collectively refer to all these workers as the "service sector" at the College of Charleston.

While Thelma, as a black service sector worker, may feel invisible, as a student at the College of Charleston, it has been impossible for me to ignore how racially segmented the school is, not only in terms of students—blacks constitute only about 6.2% of our student body, whereas whites make up 83.1%—but also in terms of its workforce. While the majority of the school's professors and administrators are white, the majority of its service sector workers are black. In order to explain this racialized segmentation in the labor market, I will focus specifically on the custodial, housekeeping, groundskeeping, maintenance, and food service workers within the service sector. I focus on these positions because they correspond with those dead-end service sector positions in which blacks are overrepresented in the City of Charleston. Studying this population can help to explain the racial earnings gap in Charleston, and how black workers are systematically denied access to "good" jobs—those with high-levels of on-the-job training, earnings and benefits, job security, tenure and mobility—and are, instead, relegated to "dead-end" jobs—those that offer little opportunity for skill enhancement, competitive earnings and benefits, continuous employment, and upward mobility (Doeringer; Peck).

One way to understand how racial hierarchies are (re)produced throughout the local labor market in the post-civil rights era is by using the theory of labor market segmentation. Labor market segmentation is defined as a historical process in which political, social, and economic forces have divided the labor market into segments, each with a unique set of characteristics, rules, and norms (Doeringer; Peck; Castree et al.). Movement between segments is limited such that workers become "stuck" in particular segments. Becoming stuck in a segment has real material consequences for these workers; it can mean being stuck in a job with low wages, little security, no tenure, few benefits, and poor work conditions. By adding an analysis of race to this theory of labor market segmentation, one can further examine how certain social groups (races, genders, ages, etc.) become overrepresented or underrepresented in certain segments. According to Richard C. Edwards (1975), the "idea of segmentation grew out of studies of poverty, unemployment, and oppressive job conditions of those persons working outside the normal white male channels of

middle-class America" (in Cummings 16). Historically, those who do not fall under the "normal white male channels of middle-class America" are those who become stuck in the low-end segments of the labor market.

The idea of labor market segmentation helps us to understand how the workplace, as a social, political, and economic institution, has been used to subjugate blacks throughout the history of the United States. Racial hierarchies are (re)produced within the workplace not only through regulating labor demand and job allocations, but through the association of race with a certain type of job. It is important to emphasize that race has no biological foundation or fixed meaning. Instead, race is a social construct produced through history, law, space, science, and cultural representations. When labor markets are organized and segmented by race, racial differences become reified and institutionalized through social, political, and economic structures. Instead of viewing racism in the workplace as the result of individual prejudices, preferences, or experiences, I will thus understand it as a scheme of institutionalized economic discrimination against non-whites throughout United States history (Omi and Winant; Mukhopadhyay et al.; Ford). This institutionalized discrimination has historically depended on distinguishing "white" work from "non-white" or "black" work. Within American capitalism, employers have historically relied on racism in order to ensure that there will always be a pool of poorly paid workers. Therefore, the development of U.S. economic institutions has systematically depended on this white-black racial division to organize laborers in a way that has benefited the (dominant, property-owning) white class (Mukhopadyay). As Omi and Winant explain, this "'divide and rule' conception…rests on the notion of labor market segmentation as the key determinant of racially based inequalities in production relations; and second, an 'exclusionism' perspective which suggests that a split labor market is the central source of these inequalities" (30).

In order to explain how black workers have become "stuck" in the dead-end, service sector, I will analyze how they are recruited, hired, and promoted, as well as how they are remunerated and retained. By examining the unique rules and regulations of this segment of the labor market and how it is associated with black workers, and by

investigating how workers perceive their own working conditions, job security, and opportunities for advancement, we can better understand the interplay between labor market segmentation and race.

To exert control over the workforce, employers impose a set of formal and informal rules that dictate the behaviors, performance, and workplace norms for workers. Through the lens of these labor control regimes, we can examine how the social interactions between employers and employees manufacture consent from the workforce. According to McKay, "worker commitment is deeply intertwined with management strategies to maintain power and control…primarily to ensure workplace stability, dampen worker disruption and turnover, and increase overall control over production" (16). Hiring and recruiting new workers are time and energy consuming tasks; therefore, it is in the interest of the employer to retain workers. And because it is also in the interest of employers to increase productivity and reduce costs, firms search for ways to secure worker commitment at a lowest price. Segmented labor markets play an important role in this strategy, "as firms leverage workers' labor market vulnerabilities and dependence on their jobs to induce greater willingness to accept conditions and terms at work" (McKay 16). By exploiting a worker's, or a race of workers', labor market vulnerabilities, employers are able to reduce workers' bargaining power and induce them to settle for poor wages, benefits, and working conditions. In order to cut labor costs, it is in the interest of firms to create a workplace environment characterized by high levels of management control and positions with no training and low skills, low wages, long and variable hours, no promotion prospects, job insecurity, part-time or temporary status, no non-wage perks, and poor workplace facilities (Castree et al. 31). However, it is in the interest of workers, and labor productivity, to fight for the opposite. In order to extract the highest labor productivity at the lowest cost, firms exploit already existing marginalizations (e.g. race and gender) within the labor market, a technique referred to as "manufacturing worker consent" (Castree et al.).

Labor Control at the College of Charleston

"When I first started working here, it was beautiful. The last few years it's hard to understand them…they're secretive, unfair. You find

things out at the last minute…[They] write you up little things without giving you a chance to explain." Dodger, a black maintenance worker at the College of Charleston, was telling me about his supervisors. A few weeks before the interview, Dodger had been "written" up for breaking a rule; a disciplinary action that that he believed was the result of a misunderstanding. But instead of being given a chance to tell his side of the story, Dodger received "five days in the street" from his supervisor. When I asked him what he meant by the phrase, he replied that he was talking about forced leave: "It could be five days; it could be three days. It's however much time they want to give you off." And, according to Dodger, it doesn't matter whether or not the worker has a "permanent" position; either way, he or she goes without pay for those days. So how did Dodger deal with his "days in the street?" In his words, "You just have to adjust your life accordingly. Do the best you can until you catch back up."

Despite disliking their work conditions and/or pay, many College of Charleston service sector workers rationalized their decision to continue working because of the perceived difficulty for finding alternate work, i.e. their labor market vulnerabilities. For example, Emily explained, "I stay here because a job is just so hard to find. I haven't looked [for another job]; I've just dealt with this." Penley and Gould (1988), drawing on Etzioni (1975), have developed the term "alienative commitment" to describe this mixed emotion. They define this type of commitment as "a condition in which workers feel a lack of control over work, yet because of a perceived absence of market alternatives, nevertheless remain attached to the firm" (in McKay 18). Beth's main concern was the volatile job market and economy at-large: "lots of businesses are shutting down…ones bigger than this place right now." While the custodial job at the College of Charleston may not be ideal for her, Brandy justified her decision to stay, explaining she "can't just walk away from the job…[and] out there it's rougher to look for a job when you got to eat."

Not only are these workers less likely to pursue "better" jobs (i.e. those with higher wages, mobility, benefits, etc.), they are also more likely to accept poor terms of work for lower wages for fear of not having a job at all. As Harry explained, "A lot of people are not getting paid what they should…not getting paid what they're worth…brought

in because they can't get a job nowhere else… [They] get stuck in the system." A system in which "good" jobs are reserved for white workers, while blacks must settle for and remain in "dead-end" ones. Brutus even told me he has heard supervisors tell temporary workers, "If you want a job, you'll take what we give." He explained that a lot of the older guys and temporary workers are afraid of losing their jobs, so they wouldn't dare speak up about low wages or poor work conditions. And, according to Alexandra, "they can get rid of [temporary workers] just like that." Nick, a temporary worker himself, admitted that he felt that he could be let go at anytime, for almost any reason. While the College is in reality depending on these workers to do jobs that many others won't, and have the luxury of choosing not to, perform, these supervisors are able to leverage black workers' labor market vulnerabilities in order to induce hard work for little remuneration.

By recruiting from a relatively "unskilled"—although even what counts as a skill has historically also been racially coded—and uneducated pool of workers as well, the College is able to flex further muscle over what the white power structure has defined as an "undesirable" and perhaps "untrainable" population a population that is easily labeled as black. In such a structure, especially in South Carolina, a "right-to-work" state, the unskilled worker is increasingly powerless. Brutus felt more confident about his chances for finding other work in the case he was terminated than his fellow workers who had no real training. He told me, "I guess I look at it like that because I'm an electrician and I can find other work; these guys don't know anything else." With the exception of the two skilled crafts workers, respondents indicated that they had received no training at the College of Charleston. By failing to provide service sector workers with on-the-job-training, the College is further able to limit employees' opportunities for promotion within the school or in pursuing alternate work on the open job market; workers are also more likely to fear the possibility of being terminated. The equation of blackness with a lack of skills provides more leverage against the black worker within the local labor market.

Firms also take advantage of vulnerable segments of the population within the workplace by demanding that they perform tasks beyond what is traditionally included in their job descriptions. By lowering or

ending the barriers between different jobs within the same sector, employers can drive down wages through the technique of "multiskilling" (Doeringer). Rather than hiring a worker who is skilled in a particular trade, and most likely having to pay a higher wage because of his or her specialized training, employers can require workers in lower-skilled jobs to perform a variety of tasks that extend beyond their job descriptions. When I asked Brutus what his job was, his first response was "they're so many." While his technical job title is maintenance worker, his responsibilities range from skilled trades like painting to electrical worker, plumbing to HVAC, and brick work to carpentry. Harry told me that he and other maintenance workers have had to do construction work, like the renovations on the Bell Building, Berry Dorm, and College Lodge, when a contractor should have been brought in. At times making them work overtime, the College used these general maintenance workers in order to save money.

However, some respondents explained that these same stresses were not placed on white workers. Brutus explained, "There are so many unfair things. There are two sets of rules [for white and black workers]." He told me of a fellow white maintenance worker who has been at the College for 16 or 17 years. While he is allowed to call in contractors to perform certain types of work for him, Brutus and the other black maintenance workers have to carry out the work themselves. Brutus thinks that his supervisor doesn't want to make this white worker quit, but "us [black workers] he handles all different ways." In this example, one can see how perhaps ideas about what is appropriate work for blacks versus what is appropriate work for whites have been maintained, as well as how employers may be more comfortable extracting harder work from black workers because they are more confident that they will not quit.

Black service sector workers at the College of Charleston are often expected to take on multiple workloads. Scarlett immediately told me she didn't like her job because "we do more than duty calls....If someone doesn't show up for their shift, they make us go and do it along with all the stuff we already have to do." In fact, many respondents complained that they frequently had to cover for coworker absences, meaning that their job assignments and location were constantly changing. This "floating around" meant that workers who were present

would have to take on all or part of the duties of the absent worker, without extra compensation or time. Even though many workers are often engaging in one and a half times or even double their outlined duties, they are often accused of being lazy or underperforming. Alexandra explained that her supervisors are always complaining that the custodians aren't working hard enough, but in her opinion it is not the workers, but the work itself, that is problematic. She said, "I know everyone here is doing the best they can. These are old buildings and you can't make them new." Unrealistic expectations coupled with unfair treatment further reproduce stereotypes about what and how well certain races of workers can perform.

The College of Charleston has also intensified working practices through the use of optional and required overtime for service sector workers. Once again by leveraging poor, black workers' labor market vulnerabilities and relying on stereotypes (e.g. that blacks are more suitable for back-breaking work), supervisors can induce work beyond the traditional work week, even without necessarily providing overtime pay. Because of their low wages, most temporary workers, and some permanent workers, opt to perform work on Saturdays and/or Sundays to earn extra money. While many service sector workers are already at the College for 40 hours during the week, they are not paid for their two 15-minute or one 30-minute breaks, so many end up with only 7.5 hours/day, and 37.5 hours/week. Therefore they engage in this extra work to reach 40 hours/week without being paid overtime. (Those workers who have already reached 40 hours/week are paid time and a half.) Regardless, this type of overworking is considered appropriate for these black workers.

In fact, most black service sector workers are also not able to enjoy the same leave and vacation time that those in the higher sectors do. On holidays, temporary workers, because they have no paid leave, must come in even when the College is closed in order to continue to be paid, even if there is nothing to do. According to temporary worker Scarlett, "They said if we wanted to get paid we had to come in, but there wasn't any work to do so I just sat." On the other hand, Alexandra, a permanent worker, has often been required to come in over the holidays to do what she characterized as more-intensive cleaning. With professors, students, and administrators gone, service

sector employees' most difficult work goes even more unnoticed, and their worth and rights as workers become less and less visible. Both Alexandra and Scarlett shared with me instances in which the heat was turned off during winter holidays while they cleaning. And even when Alexandra complained to her supervisor, nothing was done. Instead, as she told me, she and her coworkers had to bundle up in their coats in order to perform indoor work. However, she also noted, "If the students were here, believe me they'd be on."

For others, the easiest time of the year workload wise was actually when the students were on campus. Emily told me, "When summer comes, the work starts. We here all summer long getting it together." Emily was referring to the summer programs that rent out the College's residence halls. In the summer of 2006, service sector employees in her department were forced to work from 7 a.m. until 10 or 11 p.m. on some nights in order to prepare them for use. Her supervisors told her "if something had to get done, it had to get done." She explained to me how frustrated she was: "I wanted to get home too. We were the only ones here. Everyone else was home. But it's my job, and I signed up for it." While her supervisor told her when she was hired that she might have to work overtime during special circumstances, she never expected it to be 15 to 16 hours a day. There is an expectation that these black service sector workers must be willing to sacrifice maintaining a reasonable amount of personal time apart from the job, just to keep it. In many cases, weekend work is considered the rule, not the exception. Nick told me that in fall 2007 all service sector workers in his department were required to come in on Saturday. Those who could not because of extenuating circumstances were instructed to give three days notice. One week a coworker did not follow this protocol. While his second-line supervisor was only going to punish him with "five days in the street," the head of the department fired him immediately. In some departments, maintenance workers are required to be on call for 24 hours a day, seven days a week periods; no matter when a problem occurs, they must come to campus to take care of it. For example, once Brutus had to drive out to the College at 4:00 a.m. (he lives 30 to 45 minutes away) to respond to an issue in a residence hall. By the time he had solved the problem, his shift had begun, so he had to continue working for eight more hours. Like

Emily, Brutus felt that at times the College expected him to go above and beyond the call of duty, even putting their jobs before their home lives. He complained to me in such cases, "We got to leave our family; there is nothing for us. Everything's about the College…I used to wake up in the morning and couldn't wait to get to work….Now, I only come because I've got bills to pay."

Another way the College of Charleston puts pressure on directly-employed service sector to accept poor working conditions is by bringing in subcontractors. While racial hierarchy is not as readably viewable in this scheme, one can see how easily employers can artificially spearate and thus further exploit groups of black workers; while their plight as poor, black wage workers is similar, the white power structure is able to put them into competition. By adjusting the boundaries of the workplace and shifting tasks to other firms through outsourcing and subcontracting, employers can exert power over the internal labor force and coerce them to perform more work at less cost (Castree et al.). Through instilling fear in workers that they will lose their job to this external competition, firms can induce them to work harder to "keep" their jobs.

Many respondents associated the presence of WFF Services, the custodial subcontractor, with the potential loss of their own jobs as direct employees of the College of Charleston. Emily's supervisor shared that he has told her, "You best do your work because they are thinking about going with the contractor. If you want to save your job, do what you're supposed to do." Nick explained to me that WFF Services has taken over "24-hour buildings" (those which are always open) like the library and fine arts building. Now they are taking over more buildings—bigger buildings—that need more man-hours. Beth told me that WFF Services has just taken over 9 Liberty and Randolph Hall as recently as February 2, 2008. Notably, these workers are simply losing out to other black service sector workers who are accepting the same "dead-end" jobs for even lower wages and poorer conditions. Most workers recognized that by using contracted work, the College can save money; while their use may be justified by claims of improved performance, according to Alexandra and other respondents, WFF Services was only brought in "because they're cheaper."

So what actually happens to directly-employed custodians when

WFF Services acquires the cleaning contracts for those buildings they once were responsible for? According to Beth, they "do what they did the first time: send a group of temporary workers to the contractor." In this case, the College does not absorb temporary workers into different departments; instead, it just exports them to another firm. Therefore, the temporary staff that the College does employ can be considered much like the expendable labor forces associated with the process of "body-shopping," in which employees are physically brought on-site for short-term employment and employers typically provide them only with a wage and no benefits, promotion opportunities, or security (Aneesh). In other cases, College employees are simply let go, without being absorbed by the subcontractor. While some workers recognized that having more temporary workers is in the interest of the College, most service sector workers did not feel high levels of jobs security. Beth, a permanent worker of seven years, explained her lack of job security even with her permanent status: "[being replaced] can happen on any given day….Nothing in cement. They might decide they want to get rid of all the permanent and keep the temporary. We got benefits; they just got contracts." Nick told me in his department four years ago there were about 100 College workers, but now there are only 35 because so many buildings (and thus positions) have been taken over by WFF Services.

Whether they were employed by ARAMARK, WFF Services, or the College, respondents overwhelmingly shared that they were being frequently monitored on the job. According to Castree et al., by exercising maximum levels of surveillance and control, firms are further able to manufacture consent from their workers. Labor control is exerted at the workplace level through supervisors and managers who ensure that work is being produced effectively on a day-to-day basis (Castree et al.). For many respondents it was a mixture of the formal rules and their informal regulation by supervisors. For example, Brandy's main complaint wasn't about the wage or the actual work; rather, "it's the people who's over you who have so much power." Alexandra also complained that her supervisors were "always telling us we can't do this or do that." Brutus felt that his supervisor is on a power trip [with] all his troops sitting under him….They run this place almost like a damn penitentiary." The maintenance of racial and

economic hierarchy depends heavily on police-like social regulations of black workers in the workplace.

One way supervisors exercise maximum control and surveillance is by restricting service sector workers to certain areas of campus. Brutus told me that on the north side of campus, residential maintenance workers are not allowed to leave their assigned dormitories, or what the supervisor calls their "jurisdiction." But while these maintenance workers have their own office areas and break rooms in the dormitories, many custodians who clean classroom and office buildings frustratingly have "nowhere to go." For example Alexandra explained, "I don't have any place to go after I'm done with work." Therefore, she has to constantly walk around campus until her eight-hour shift is over. And when Alexandra walks around, she, like many other workers, feels that she is constantly being watched. She told me that there is a white man who follows her and the other workers around to "catch them" doing something they aren't supposed to be doing, or being somewhere they aren't supposed to be. Thelma also explained, "When you go to buildings to do your work, you got people watching you." Ironically, because many of these service sector workers, mostly custodians, are often shuffled to fill spots, they don't always even have a place they are "supposed" to be; they are simultaneously expected to be doing everything, everywhere.

When workers are "caught" breaking rules, they are reported to their supervisors and receive disciplinary action. According to most respondents, the College is supposed to follow state policy when disciplining permanent employees. This policy is as follows: (1) verbal warning; (2) write up; (3) five days "on notice" (or what respondents referred to as "in the street"); and (4) an official meeting with human resources. However, as with other College of Charleston employment practices, respondents indicated that this policy was followed inconsistently. Brandy felt that there was, in fact, no defined system of punishment; rather it was just something her supervisors "drummed up for themselves." According to Brandy, it's different for different people; "If I'm kissing up to you [the supervisor], I'm alright." Dodger also felt, "Some people get away with stuff; other's don't. It depends on whether or not they like you." Overall, respondents were frustrated with the inconsistent and nebulous discipline policies of the College,

the execution of which many felt was heavily dictated by supervisor favoritism.

Most workers could recall incidents in which the discipline policy was either manipulated to the disadvantage of workers, or just completely ignored. For example, Scarlett told me that when a College of Charleston dean suspected a custodian had used his office computer, the departmental supervisor disciplined the entire shift, threatening "to put them out on the street for three days" if the perpetrator didn't confess. Such an image of a group of black custodians being verbally berated and threatened by a white supervisor is reminiscent of the plantation model of worker regulation. In fact, many respondents felt that they would guarantee their own demise if they were to voice any complaints about their working conditions to their supervisors. According to Tim, if temporary workers challenge a supervisor, they just "slide them out the door." Even having permanent status does not make it easier to speak up to supervisors about problems on the job. Brandy explained, "Even today, you really can't feel that you have job security because if you have someone over you, and you voice your opinion, you feel vulnerable. You don't know what tomorrow holds. They might hold it against you. You might have people on top of you telling you to be quiet." In the past when she's tried to voice complaints to her supervisor, she's been told "the next time [you complain], you're going." For her, it's easier to just keep quiet rather than speak up to her manager.

Once again, permanent and temporary workers both felt low levels of job security. As Dodger explained, with permanent status, "They know who you are," insinuating that perhaps they are even less likely to challenge the status quo. When it comes to speaking up to his supervisor, Dodger explained, "It's touchy. Some things you can talk over and some things you can't." During his interview, Brutus repeatedly expressed that he wished that there was a way to expose what he felt were unfair management practices. But he, like many respondents, felt that if a worker were to express discontent with the job, his or her statements could be used as justification for their being fired in the future. This asymmetrical amount of power that the white management has over the black workers, along with the poor working conditions, allows workers to be exploited with little to no questions

asked.

In cases in which service sector workers might need to report indiscretions on the part of their supervisors, respondents once again shared that they had no one to turn to. According to Castree et al., labor control is also expressed when "contact with the regional or head office, or fellow workers on other client sites, is highly circumscribed" (150). In fact, most workers told me that they had never met the highest level managers. Not only is the workplace hierarchy clearly defined and accented by color, each level is segmented by extreme social regulation. Brandy explained, "If you want to talk to someone over [the supervisor], they don't have time…or say they don't have time. [The supervisor says] if you go to them they're going to listen to me, not you….The supervisor will be here, and you'll be gone." This makes Brandy feel like, "You ain't got no chance in the world. When I first came here, I couldn't wait to come to work, but now we don't really care to be here anymore. You [just have to] deal with it. If I can get through this today, I can do it tomorrow. You can't wait until Friday." For most this meant that in situations in which they might need to report instances of misconduct (for example, a few shared they had been cursed at on the job), the supervisor's word would always be taken over theirs.

Brutus explained that he felt that even when a supervisor or team leader was black, they would quickly turn their backs on the lower-level workers in such cases. He told me that his assistant supervisor was "what we call the Clarence Thomas" and the team leaders were "the house ones." Even though the team leaders are doing the same work as the regular workers, Dodger felt that the supervisors and work leaders "are all in cahoots" against them in efforts to silence dissent. Interestingly, the construction of blackness by these workers also includes the characterization of certain black workers — especially those with higher levels of power — as treacherous to the black community. Those black workers who have been able to climb the ranks, to participate at least partially in the American dream, have become demonized within the black community; they are also deviations of what has been defined as "black" by the white power structure and accepted as truth by even blacks themselves.

While some respondents demonstrated elements of a common

class consciousness, workers were not always quick to identify their common status as black workers. Whether through the chain of command, or the division of workers by different departments, and even by subcontracted firms, employers can reduce the power of otherwise similarly situated workers, and prevent collective bargaining. According to Castree et al., the "process of splitting the workforce into small fragments at multiple workplaces reduces the potential for organizing and resisting employment conditions, despite the fact their labour is absolutely central to generating profits for the contract service firms" (149). Although Catherine, a WFF Services employee, works on the same campus as College service sector employees and performs essentially the same work, she reports little to no interaction with them. Scarlett, another contracted custodian, said that she was frustrated with the "backbiting…people telling on each other" that went on between the WFF Services and College custodial shifts. Even within the College-employed service sector, the split between temporary and permanent workers has led to tension. Alexandra told me that temporary workers often say, "It seems like all the temporary people do the work," when in reality it's just that they outnumber, not outperform, the permanent staff.

(Re)producing Racial Hierarchies

We have seen that through a variety of employee rules and disciplinary strategies, College of Charleston service sector supervisors are able to manufacture consent from the workforce. In this way, employers can leverage poor, black service sector workers' labor market vulnerabilities to extract the highest productivity at the least cost. While at the beginning of this paper I used Thelma's words to demonstrate how workers overwhelmingly felt "invisible" on their job, when it comes to regulating the behaviors of workers supervisors constantly take notice. Thelma complained to me, "We're only visible if we get caught going to the store. I believe all of us are over the hump; all of us are full grown. The time they spend following behind us….We all know wrong from right; who follow behind them? They sit at their desk doing nothing all day. They pick at you for no reason. I'm tired of that." Rather than using positive incentives, like higher wages, benefits, and promotion opportunities to gain worker

commitment, the College of Charleston has opted to employ tactics that reduce worker autonomy and elicit consent by exploiting various vulnerabilities.

George described the control his supervisors have over him and other service sector workers with rather provocative imagery: "He acts like its slave ground again." When I asked him what he meant, he said that the President of the College could be compared—at least metaphorically—to the owner of a plantation. He rightly recognized how both serve as members of a white male elite ruling over a tract of property maintained by a group of black workers. He also compared the white supervisors to slave masters in reference to their rules and regulations: it's "like back in slavery with work…you get caught on the phone, you get days in the street, the next time you get terminated. It's harsh stuff."

In a contemporary setting, the power that the white supervisors and management have over the livelihood of black workers, as well as the use of black labor for the building up and maintenance of the property of the white structure, is comparable to that of the plantation economy of past centuries in its distribution of power. Simply put: when the College hires members of an already marginalized population (poor blacks) for bad jobs (low pay, no benefits, little security), and then employs them under stressful conditions (forced overtime, constant surveillance, firing threats), it exercises incredible power over them.

These black service sector workers are in positions they simultaneously recognize as unhealthy but necessary. With their reduced power as waged workers and poor blacks, they must accept the terms that the employer has laid out for them. Yes, they do have choices, but those choices are limited. In many cases, their choices are confined to questioning whether or not it is worth putting up with a bad job in order to provide food and shelter for themselves and families. Choosing to be free of the oppressive employer is also choosing to expose themselves to the harsh realities of unemployment and poverty. And if they were to secure another job, the hegemonic construction of black and "unskilled" work means that their new working conditions are likely to be similar. By examining the relationship between labor market segmentation and race, we have

seen how firms can leverage poor, black service sector workers' labor market vulnerabilities to extract the highest productivity at the least cost.

Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, white privilege has been maintained within a variety of social institutions, including the workplace. The idea of a meritocracy has often been used to explain away inequalities as the result of differing levels of achievement., rather than differential treatment by institutions based on inherited characteristics (not only gender and race, but also wealth and social connection). This view of meritocracy, like a neoclassical view in economics, understands an individual's place in society as the result of his or her merit or deficiencies. The system, like the free market, is fair; each gets what he or she deserves. Inequalities are not structural; instead they are the result of certain people, or kinds of people, not working hard enough. According to Mukhopadhyay, "The initial use of race to justify economic exploitation becomes an explanation of why social inequality is consistent with a meritocracy, with democracy, freedom, a society based on individual merit. Success and wealth reflects merit. Lack of success and poverty simply reflects one's personal failings, a lack of ability. One gets what one deserves" (136). When we cast the individual, not the system, as the explanation for "failure," we are simultaneously able to announce the "end of racial discrimination" and perpetuate racial hierarchies.

Black service sector workers at the College have also internalized the rhetoric of a meritocracy, often referring to varying levels of education and training between different occupational sectors. Tim, a maintenance worker, told me he felt like other College employees have "air about them that they are better [while] we're less educated....Sometimes people give the feeling they are superior." Similarly, Harry shared, "People tend to think we are unintelligent because of our job positions...figure we have nothing better to do....They feel that we are incompetent...that we don't have feelings." Thelma also felt that others on campus "look down on us like we are dirt." Scarlett, a custodian, told me, "They look down on us for our position. One professor used us as an example for the students: 'Do you want to end up like this?' But there are a lot of different reasons for having these jobs, and lots of us have other jobs. But they just see

us as poor, black Negroes who can't succeed." These black service sector workers recognize racial hierarchies in the workplace, and how their supposed lower levels of education and training have deemed them appropriate for these low-end jobs.

Within this merit-based system of achievement, low-end, service sector jobs have also been dehumanized in order to rationalize the overrepresentation of blacks. In the construction of a reinvented racial workplace hierarchy, "black" work is characterized as "low-skilled," with "white" work the opposite. Again, at the beginning of this discussion, Thelma, a black custodian, felt that she was not only "overworked and underpaid" but also "invisible." According to Castree et al., "the social construction of these tasks as 'unskilled'—and therefore unworthy of reward by promotion or wage increases—by employees, client companies, and indeed society at large reinforces their marginalization. This is linked to the relative 'invisibility' of these tasks, particularly in the cases of cleaning and security workers, which predominately take place when client premises are almost empty" (150). The characterization of service sector work as unnoticeable, and therefore unimportant for the livelihood of the campus community, makes it easier to justify the low wages and poor working conditions of these overwhelmingly black workers. These respondents' invisibility as service sector workers contrasts highly with their visibility as black workers: their color has provided them with a racial script that can be exploited in the labor market and the workplace. In the words of Rachel, a custodian who was recommended by a friend who already worked at the College, "I just needed a job."

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